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## Grade Inflation Rates among Different Ability Students, Controlling for Other Factors

**Stephanie Mc Spirit**  
**Eastern Kentucky University**

**Kirk E. Jones**  
**Eastern Kentucky University**

### Abstract

This study compares grade inflation rates among different ability students at a large, open admissions public University. Specifically, this study compares trends in graduating grade point average (GPA) from 1983 to 1996 across low, typical and higher ability students. This study also tests other explanations for increases in graduating GPA. These other explanations are changes in 1) ACT score 2) gender 3) college major and 4) vocational programs. With these other explanations considered, regression results still report an inflationary trend in graduating GPA. Time, as measured by college entry year, is still a significant positive predictor of GPA. More directly, comparisons of regression coefficients reveal lower ability students as experiencing the highest rate of grade increase. Higher grade inflation rates among low aptitude students suggest that faculty might be using grades to encourage learning among marginal students.

This study compares grade inflation rates among different ability students at a large, open admissions public University. Specifically, this study compares trends in graduating grade point average (GPA) from 1983 to 1996 across low, typical and higher ability students. This study also tests other explanations for increases in graduating GPA. These other explanations are changes in 1) ACT score 2) gender 3) college major and 4) vocational programs. With these other explanations considered, regression results still report an inflationary trend in graduating GPA. Time, as measured by college entry year, is still a significant positive predictor of GPA. More directly, comparisons of regression coefficients reveal lower ability students as experiencing the highest rate of grade increase. Higher grade inflation rates among low aptitude students suggest that faculty might be using grades to encourage learning among marginal students.

In this study, we examine grade inflation at a public open-enrollment university. There has been little attention on grade inflation within public institutions (Moore, 1996 p.2). Yet the media has provided ample coverage of grade inflation at selective colleges and elite universities (see Reibstein and King, 1994; Strauss, 1997; Archibold, 1998; Sowell, 1994; Shea, 1994; Gose, 1997). In fact, a read of the newspaper would even suggest that the steady proliferation of A and B grades and steady climb in grade point average (GPA) is only at issue among top tier institutions. However, a review of a few other reports (Beaver, 1997; Franklin, 1991; Moore, 1996; Stone, 1995; Van Allen, 1990) shows that grade inflation is also a concern within less selective colleges and universities.

This study focuses on an open admission, public university that typically enrolls 13,000 undergraduates annually. The relatively large size of the university, combined with the fact that most other institutions are also relatively non selective in their admissions criteria (Beaver, 1997,p.5), make this study's report on grade inflation more applicable to the vast majority of other colleges and universities than the media focus on grade inflation at top notch institutions. In examining grade inflation, this study examines trends in graduating GPA from 1983 to 1996. Our general findings suggest that students have been graduating with consistently higher grade point averages since 1983. We believe these findings show 'grade inflation' since we statistically controlled for any number of other alternate explanations (justifications) for the rise in graduating GPA. We speak to these other influences in the following section.

However, these general findings are not our most important results. Our most important results are based on further analysis of graduating GPA with student aptitude. We wondered whether the faculty, over the years, had changed their grading behavior to accommodate one student group over another. Subsequently, we compared rates of grade increases between low, typical and higher ability students over time. Few grade inflation studies have made similar comparisons, though several studies have hinted that grade inflation rates may differ across different student ability groups (Bearden, Wolf and Grosch, 1992 p.740; Kolevzon, 1981 p.200; Prather, Smith and Kodras, 1979 p.20; Sabot and Wakeman-Linn in Shea, 1994, p.A46). Some studies suggest that high ability students gravitate toward departments that hold more stringent grading standards and lower ability students gravitate toward departments that grade higher (Bearden, Wolf and Grosch, 1992 p. 740). On the other hand, Sabot and Wakeman-Linn suggest the reverse, in that traditionally low grading departments have experienced the highest rate of a grade increase (quoted in Shea, 1994, p.A46; also Kolevzon, 1981 p.200; Prather, Smith and Kodras, 1979 p.20). Subsequently, current grade inflation rates might be steepest among the high aptitude student groups. In short, there is some comment to suggest that rates of grade inflation might be related to student ability. This paper examines more fully the extent to which faculty might have altered their grading

behavior toward one student group over another.

In making our own distinctions between differences in student aptitude, we relied on student scores on the American College Test (ACT). We acknowledge the potential class bias in using the ACT as an aptitude measure. We remind readers that ACT score, at best, measures college readiness and is not a measure of cognitive ability. Few grade inflation studies have been troubled in using ACT score as a measure of college aptitude. Most studies, for example, that control for an increase in student preparation as an explanation for an increase in grades have relied on the ACT (Breland, 1976; Chesen-Jacobs, Johnson and Keene, 1978; Cluskey, Griffin and Ehlin, 1997; Kwon, Kendig and Bae, 1997; Mullen, 1995; Olsen, 1997; Taylor, 1985; Remegius, 1979). Like other studies, we also use ACT as a statistical control on grade increase. Unlike other studies, we also rely on student ACT to categorize students into low, typical and higher academic ability groups. We then use these distinctions to check for differences in rates of grade inflation between students of low, typical and higher college aptitude. Results show important and significant differences in grade inflation rates between student aptitude groups. These results remain significant upon controlling for the influence of other factors.

## **Literature Review**

### **Controlling for Other Explanations of Grade Increase**

#### **Aptitude**

A rise in college grades might be due to other factors other than grade inflation. An increase in high grades, for example, might be due to an increased presence of more college- prepared students. Early studies examined the influence of increased student preparation levels as an explanation for rising grades. Each found little evidence to suggest that increases in grade point average were due to improvements in student preparation (Breland, 1976; Chesen-Jacobs, Johnson and Keene, 1978; Taylor, 1985; Remegius, 1979). A recent study reaches similar conclusions: Cluskey, Griffin and Ehlin, (1997) find little evidence that increases in GPA are due to an influx of more college able students; in fact, a negative correlation between GPA and ACT is noted (p.274) with grades rising and average ACT declining over the years. Yet other recent studies reach different conclusions. Other studies document a significant rise in student aptitude and preparedness levels over the years at their prospective institutions (Olsen, 1997; Mullen, 1995; Kwon, Kendig and Bae, 1997 ). Olsen notes that the average incoming student scored in the 90th percentile on the ACT in 1994, whereas in previous years, the typical student ranked in the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile (p.4). Considering the rising academic caliber of the student body, Olsen suggests that the corresponding increase in student GPA is warranted and not due to an inflationary spiral in college grading (p.7). Mullen, likewise, finds a significant increase in ACT score over the years. He concludes also that the increase in GPA over the years is the result of more college-prepared students (1995, p.12). In short, in identifying grade inflation at prospective institutions, researchers have examined the confounding effect that increases in student aptitude and preparation levels have in explaining grade increase. Researchers, at separate institutions, have reached separate conclusions on whether identified grade rise is the earned result of increases in student preparation levels or the result of grade inflation.

This leads to the standard empirical definition of grade inflation: That is, if grades rise over a period, without a corresponding increase in student aptitude levels (as measured typically through ACT score), then researchers have "probable cause" to

assume that grade increase is due to an inflationary trend in faculty grading (Cluskey et al., 1997 p.273; see also Carney, Isakson and Ellsworth, 1978, p.219). This standard definition and how it has been applied in some studies has been improved upon in others: for example, a number of other studies control for other student and institutional-related factors that might explain an increase in high grades besides a rise in ACT score.

### **Age**

Several recent studies, for example, point to the growing presence of older, more mature, serious minded college students as a possible explanation for grade increase. Kwon, Kendig and Bae (1997) note a positive correlation between age and grades: As GPA increased from 1983 to 1993, average student age also increased from 19 to 22 years (p.52); moreover, further tests show student age as a significant positive predictor of student GPA (p.53). Olsen (1997) corroborates this, in that being a mature student, returning to school, served also as a positive predictor of college GPA (p.10). Thus, research suggests that an increase in the number of older, more-serious minded college students may serve to explain an increase in high grades at some institutions.

### **Gender**

Another demographic influence to control for is gender. Early studies noted that the influx of female students in the seventies might explain part of the increase in GPA (Birnbaum, 1977, p.527). A recent national study confirms that female students continue to earn, on average, significantly higher college marks than their male counterparts (Adelman, 1995, p.267). Studies suggest that a notable increase in female students might explain some of the aggregate rise in grade point average. Thus, gender would be another demographic factor to control for before attributing grade increase to grade inflation.

### **Course Withdrawals**

Apart from demographic shifts, many studies note institutional changes that might explain a rise in high grades. Some studies, for example, cite university changes in withdrawal policies as a contributing explanation for rising grade point average (Chesen-Jacobs, Johnson and Keene, 1978 p.14; Hoyt and Reed, 1976). Universities that implement more lenient withdrawal policies make it easier for students to withdrawal from courses that threaten their grade point average (Weller, 1986 p.125 ). While faculty might continue to grade the same, GPA might climb due to more liberal withdrawal policies. This would be another factor to consider before implicating faculty of grade inflation.

### **College Major**

Other studies comment that the migration of student majors from low to high grading departments is a principal factor behind grade inflation ( Bearden, Wolf and Grosch, 1992; Prather, Smith and Kodras, 1979; Sabot and Wakeman-Linn, 1991; Summerville, Ridley and Maris, 1990). According to this view, not all academic departments are equally responsible for grade inflation as far as faculty in certain disciplines might inflate grades more so than others. Lanning and Perkins (1995) note that faculty in the College of Education are often indicted as contributing more to grade inflation because of more emphasis on mastery learning approaches and more collaborative relations with students as future teachers. Here, a movement of students into the education field might lead to an aggregate rise in GPA of which not all faculties

in all departments are responsible. Other studies note that to counteract the flight of students to higher GPA departments, traditionally low grading departments might be inflating grades more in order recruit and retain majors (Sabot and Wakeman-Linn in Shea, 1994, p. A46).

### **Vocational Programs**

Other studies have attributed aggregate grade increase to increases in vocational programs within the university (Sabot and Wakeman-Linn, 1991, p.159). Such programs, they have argued, grade more on mastery and learning competency models than other more academic departments (Goldman, 1985, p.103 ). If more A and B grades are awarded in job-oriented programs more than in other college departments than an increase of students into more vocational oriented curriculums might account for an aggregate rise in high grades. This would then be another factor to control for before charging faculty with grade inflation.

In summary, prior research reports a half dozen other plausible explanations for an aggregate increase in GPA other than faculty simply dispensing higher marks. These other possible explanations are 1) An increase in student aptitude and preparedness levels, 2) an increase in older, more mature college students, 3) an increase in the number of female students, 4) an increase in leniency in university withdrawal policy 5) an increase of students into higher grading departments and 6) an increase in students into more vocationally oriented college programs. Each of these increases might explain or justify an aggregate increase in grade point average over the years. In this study, we control for these other plausible influences prior to identifying grade trends as "grade inflation."

## **Research Design**

### **Sample Controls**

*Age.* The influence of age on grades is held constant in our analyses through requesting a homogenous sample of traditional college-age students. Our student sample consists of students that entered the university as full time freshmen, in which the average entering age of students in our sample is nineteen years. (S.E.=.05). With age held constant across our sample, an increase in graduating GPA within our sample is not to be attributed to changes in student age.

For each year of our investigation, we randomly selected 500 records of entering full time freshmen, which resulted in a relative large panel of freshmen records. Yet like inflation, retention is also an issue in public, open-enrollment universities and not all students in our initial panel went on to graduate. As a result, our analysis of trends in graduating GPA is based on 1,986 graduating seniors, -that entered the university as full time freshmen, between 1983 and 1992. Our data is more up to date than what is implied: Students that entered in 1992, for example, have had time to graduate. Subsequently, data on graduating GPA is recorded up through and including the 1996 graduating year.

*University Withdrawal Policy.* Liberal changes in university withdrawal policies might explain an increase in average GPA. Students might use liberal withdrawal options to withdraw from courses that they are failing or that threatens their GPA. This, however, is not a notable influence in our analysis since our University started a more liberal withdrawal policy approximately the same time that our analysis of grade trends begins. The second year of our 14-year investigation (1984/85) our university adopted a

more lenient withdrawal policy. Under the policy, students have up to eight weeks of class to withdraw from a course and receive a generic "W". Before the change in policy, withdrawal while failing (w/F) or withdrawal while passing (w/P) was noted on the student transcript. Thus, from 1983/84 to 1984/85 the number of students using their withdrawal options increased significantly and has remained steady over the remaining thirteen years of our analysis. (Note 1)

## Statistical Controls

We statistically control influences of aptitude, gender, college major and vocational program on graduating GPA. To control influences of changes in student aptitude levels, data on ACT score are used. In using ACT as a control on aptitude, we adjusted pre-1989 student scores to equate with post-1989 enhanced version scores based on the standard ACT conversion chart. By adjusting pre-1989 scores, this allows for more accurate comparisons in ACT score across time.

To control for the influence of an increase in female students, gender enters the analysis as a dummy variable (0=male, 1=female). To account for shifts in student major composition as another explanation for grade increase, we based our control at the college level. Table 1 lists the nine colleges, along with the corresponding average graduating GPA for our sample of full-time entering freshmen. A review of Table 1 indicates notable differences in average graduating grade point average across colleges. Students in the College of Natural and Mathematical Sciences (Mean GPA Grad = 3.16, S.E.=.042) and the College of Education (Mean GPA Grad = 3.04, S.E.=.025) receive, on average, higher grades over our 14-year period. Consequently, a migration of students into either one of these two departments over the years would lead to a natural bump in graduating GPA that wouldn't necessarily implicate individual faculty for grade inflation. To control for this influence, graduating averages (listed in Table 1) are included as a control variable in our analysis.

**Table 1**  
**Average Graduating GPA by College, 1983-1996**

College	Average Graduating GPA
College of Allied Health and Nursing	2.76 (.029)
College of Arts and Technology	3.05 (.026)
College Arts and Humanities	3.00 (.038)
College of Business	2.84 (.025)
College of Education	3.09 (.025)
College of Health, P.E., and Recreation	2.81 (.036)
College of Law Enforcement	2.82 (.029)
College of Natural and Mathematical Sciences	3.17 (.042)
College of Social and Behavioral Sciences	2.94 (.030)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

To determine the influence of vocational programs on grade inflation, we dummied college major into the following categories. The College of Law Enforcement, which contains the programs of police studies, correctional services and fire safety and the College of Applied Arts and Technology, which contains the programs of agriculture, military science, human environmental science, along with several other programs, were both coded into one category (=1), while other Colleges (listed in Table 1) were coded into the other (=0). This dummy variable therefore estimates the influence of vocational programs on graduating GPA.

*Measuring Rates of Grade Inflation* We use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to examine the extent of grade inflation on graduating GPA by student entry year. Under the null hypothesis of no inflation, student entry year should not be a significant predictor of graduating GPA. That is, time of entry into the University should not influence grade point average. Yet, under conditions of grade inflation, time becomes an important influence on GPA, with recently enrolled students earning significantly higher grade point averages upon graduation than students of ten years prior. Moreover, if student entry year is a significant predictor of graduating GPA, then we would expect it to remain significant when other possible explanations (controls) are added into the regression analysis.

*Measuring Student Ability Levels* The principal purpose of this study is to compare grade trends between students of varying incoming ability. To make such comparisons, we base our distinctions on the ACT quartile and inter quartile ranges of our sample. This results in the following subgroups: Students with composite ACT scores between 10 through 17, between 18 through 21, and greater than or equal to 22 are respectively categorized as low, typical and higher ability students. Separate OLS regression analyses are then used to compare differences in grade inflation rates between these student aptitude groups. To determine whether observed differences in rates of a grade increase between student groups represent significant differences ( $p < .05$ ), we then examine the combined interaction affect of ACT subgroups with student entry year. We explain this procedure in more detail below.

## Regression Results

Table 2 summarizes our regression results. Model A reports the influence of student entry year, and other potential influences, on graduating GPA for our full sample ( $n=1,986$ ) of graduating full time freshmen. Significant slope coefficients on each of our control variables suggest that each is important to graduating GPA. For example, regression results report gender as a significant influence on graduating GPA. Regression results report female students graduating, on average, with significantly higher grade point averages than male students. Moreover, gender remains a significant predictor when college major and ACT score are controlled in the regression. This suggests that the higher aggregate GPA among female students is not only due to females migrating to higher grading departments but indicates, irrespective of college major as well as ACT score, that female students tend to graduate with grade point averages .123 points higher than their male counterparts. In short, regression results on gender show, following national trends, that female college students are more grade conscious than male college students.

**Table 2**

## Graduating GPA: Regression Estimates of Grade Inflation, 1983-1996: Full-time Entering Freshmen

	<b>Model A</b> Full Sample	<b>Model B</b> Low ACT Students (ACT 10 - 17)	<b>Model C</b> Typical ACT Students (ACT 18 - 21)	<b>Model D</b> Upper ACT Student (ACT > 21)
<b>n, sample size</b>	1,968	379	896	693
<b>R<sup>2</sup>, squared mult. R</b>	.308	.18	.13	.22
<b>b<sub>0</sub>, intercept</b>	-.018 (.182)	-.021 (.438)	-.71 (.35)	.60 (.330)
<b>Student Entry Year</b>	.021*** (.003)	.031*** (.006)	.018*** (.004)	.019*** (.005)
<b>ACT score</b>	.053*** (.002)	.035** (.013)	.059*** (.011)	.058*** (.006)
<b>Gender</b>	.136*** (.018)	.122*** (.037)	.065* (.026)	.229*** (.031)
<b>Average College GPA</b>	.570*** (.065)	.665*** (.145)	.785*** (.095)	.305** (.110)
<b>Interaction Effects</b>				
<b>Low vs. typical ACT X Student Entry Year</b>	.014* (.006)			
<b>Low vs. higher ACT X Student Entry Year</b>	.018 (.054)			
<b>Typical vs higher ACT X Student Entry Year</b>	-.008 (.032)			

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

But our emphasis is not on the influence of gender, nor ACT scores, nor college major in predicting GPA upon graduation. These are added as controls in our analysis to determine whether increases in graduating GPA are the result of grade inflation or these factors. With these other influences controlled for, Model A reports a significant slope coefficient for student entry year. This shows that the year of entry into the university is a significant predictor of graduating GPA despite changes in ACT score, gender and college major. The slope coefficient for student entry year ( $b_1=.021$ ) shows a steady increase in graduating GPA from 1983 to 1996. The coefficient shows an approximate rise of .021 grade points annually since 1983. Looked at over a five-year trajectory, regression results estimate that graduating GPA has risen, on average, more than one tenth (.1) of a grade point every five years since 1983.

Models B, C and D compare grade inflation rates between low, typical and higher ability students. Slope coefficients on student entry year for each model are revealing.



Comparisons of coefficients across models for student entry year show the rate of inflation in graduating GPA to be higher for low aptitude students than for other student subgroups. Regression coefficients measure grade inflation rate for typical and upper ACT students at an annual rate of increase of .018 (Model C) and .019 (Model D) grade points respectively. By contrast, the rate of grade inflation for lower aptitude students (Model B) was estimated at increasing .031 grade points annually. This suggests that nearly every three years since 1983, lower aptitude students have experienced an average increase of one-tenth of a grade point (.1) rise in graduating GPA.

To determine whether these differences in rates of a grade increase represent significant differences, we tested the dummy interaction on ACT subgroups with student entry year. A significant coefficient on this variable would indicate that ACT subgroup and year of entry interact to predict graduating GPA. This would suggest important ACT subgroup differences in grade inflation rates across time. The first tested interaction of low (=1) versus typical (=0) ACT subgroups with student entry year is significant. This suggests an important difference in rates of grade inflation between low versus typical ACT students, with low aptitude students experiencing significantly higher rates of grade inflation. On the other hand, results report a non significant interaction between low (=0) and higher (=1) aptitude students and student entry year. Therefore, results show no important difference in grade inflation rates between low versus higher aptitude students. Finally, results also report a non significant interaction between typical (=0) and higher (=1) aptitude students and student entry year. This also shows no important difference in annual rates of grade increase between typical and higher ability students. In summary, interaction effects report higher grade inflation rates for lower aptitude students in comparison to typical ability students.

Table 3 reports our final control of vocational programs on grade inflation. The influence of job-oriented programs on grade trends among lower ACT students might be most relevant, since less college prepared students may more likely enroll in college programs that provide more job-related training. This may be an important control variable in explaining increases in grade point average among less college ready students especially.

**Table 3**  
**Graduating GPA:**  
**Regression Estimates of Grade Inflation, 1983-1996**  
**Controlling for the Influence of Vocational Programs**

	<b>Model A</b> Full Sample	<b>Model B</b> Low ACT Students (ACT 10 - 17)
<b>n, sample size</b>	1708	297
<b>R<sup>2</sup>, squared mult. R</b>	.28	.18
<b>b<sub>0</sub>, intercept</b>	1.58 (.055)	1.86 (.228)

<b>Student Entry Year</b>	.023*** (.003)	.034*** (.007)
<b>ACT Score</b>	.055*** (.003)	.035* (.014)
<b>Gender</b>	.196*** (.019)	.207*** (.041)
<b>Vocational</b>	.032 (.021)	.018 (.048)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Model A in Table 3 reports the influence and control of vocational programs on graduating GPA for our full sample. With vocational curriculums included as a control variable, entry year remains a separate and significant influence on GPA upon graduation. This suggests that our initial assumption that part of the rise in graduating GPA might be the result of a migration of students into more jobs-related curriculums is neither a strong nor partial explanation for the identified grade rise in graduating GPA. The same findings apply to lower aptitude students (Model B). Vocational programs were not significant predictors of graduating GPA nor were they important controls in explaining grade inflation among lower aptitude students.

## Conclusion

With any number of aptitude, institutional and other demographic factors held constant in our analysis, our general regression model reports a consistent climb in graduating GPA from 1983 to 1996. Further, our subgroup models show an even higher rate of grade inflation among the lower aptitude student group over the years. Moreover, by controlling the influence of other institutional and demographic explanations on grade rise, we believe we have isolated the aspect of grade increase that might be due to individual faculty changes in grading behavior. Considering, for example, the substantial increase in grade point average among lower aptitude students, our findings show that faculty seem to be more benevolent in assigning grades to low ability students than perhaps fourteen years ago. This suggests a possible change in faculty grading behavior in that faculty might increasingly be relying on grades to encourage and stimulate learning among more marginal students.

In short, it seems as if faculties at open-admissions universities may embrace the equalizing mission of higher education more so than faculties at selective colleges and elite universities. In the classroom, this might mean that faculty are dismantling the hierarchy of learning that is implied by a normal distribution of grades. Outside the classroom, this might mean that faculty are grappling with broader issues of opportunity and social mobility (Birnbaum, 1977, pp. 523-524). During the Vietnam War, for example, grades took on deeper significance than a report on course performance. Likewise, college grades today may carry deeper significance as far as a college degree becomes increasingly, a prerequisite for future economic survival. Consequently, faculty today, as during the Vietnam War, might be giving more good grades because of their

future concern for students generally, and for more marginal students especially.

All told, grade inflation has been proscribed as faculty failure to impart meaningful distinctions between students. Thus, it supposedly shows lack of faculty accountability to students, parents and to the larger society. Yet grade inflation might go beyond finger pointing and front accusations, and might reflect a complex social mix where faculty -through grades-might be trying to foster positive feeling toward learning and where faculty, might be awarding higher marks to confer the necessary credentials and future prospects of employment and job security on outgoing students. On its face, these may be both benign even benevolent approaches to the meaning and purpose grades. Yet we wonder ourselves whether grades are the appropriate mechanism from which to tackle burning issues of mobility, opportunity and job security. On this latter dimension, we wonder whether such a program of grade encouragement and credentialing, might not reinforce an ideology of equal opportunity through education. Thus, rather than ameliorating the current system of economic inequities and class hierarchy, current grading trends might be providing the necessary justifying ideology for it.

## Note

1. Data obtained from our Office of Institutional Research reports the percentage of course withdrawals for each of the years of our investigation as the following:  
1983/84=4.76; 1984/85=7.04; 1985/86=6.93; 1986/87=7.03; 1987/88=7.17  
1988/89=7.37 1989/90=7.68 1990/91=8.25 1991/92=8.33 1992/93=9.09 1993/94=10.06  
1994/95=9.64 1995/196=9.24.

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## **About the Authors**

### **Stephanie J. Mc Spirit**

Stephanie J. Mc Spirit received her Ph.D. from the University of Buffalo in 1994, after

which she accepted a position at Eastern Kentucky University. She is an Assistant Professor of Sociology where she teaches courses in research methods and statistics. For the past three years she has examined trends in grade point averages along with faculty views on grade inflation. This research has been an outgrowth of serving on the ECU Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee on Grade Inflation.

Email: [AntMcSPI@acs.eku.edu](mailto:AntMcSPI@acs.eku.edu)

Web page: <http://www.anthropology.eku.edu/MCSPiRiT/>

### **Kirk E. Jones**

Kirk E. Jones received his Ph.D. from Iowa State University in 1991. He has been a member of the faculty at Eastern Kentucky University since 1990. He is an Assistant Professor of Mathematics where he teaches courses ranging from college algebra through real and complex analysis. For the past three years he has served as Chair of the ECU Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee on Grade Inflation. Recent scholarly activity has been an outgrowth of serving on this University committee.

Email: [jones@eagle.eku.edu](mailto:jones@eagle.eku.edu)

Web page: <http://eagle.eku.edu/~jones/jones.html>

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canalesa@servidor.unam.mx

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Jose.Contreras@doe.d5.ub.es

**Josué González (U.S.A.)**  
Arizona State University  
josue@asu.edu

**Rollin Kent (México)**  
Departamento de Investigación  
Educativa- DIE/CINVESTAV  
rkent@gemtel.com.mx  
kentr@data.net.mx

**Javier Mendoza Rojas (México)**  
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de  
México  
javiermr@servidor.unam.mx

**Humberto Muñoz García (México)**  
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de  
México  
humberto@servidor.unam.mx

**Daniel Schugurensky**  
(Argentina-Canadá)  
OISE/UT, Canada  
dschugurensky@oise.utoronto.ca

**Jurjo Torres Santomé (Spain)**  
Universidad de A Coruña  
jurjo@udc.es

**María Beatriz Luce (Brazil)**  
Universidade Federal de Rio Grande do  
Sul- UFRGS  
lucemb@orion.ufrgs.br

**Marcela Mollis (Argentina)**  
Universidad de Buenos Aires  
mmollis@filo.uba.ar

**Angel Ignacio Pérez Gómez (Spain)**  
Universidad de Málaga  
aiperez@uma.es

**Simon Schwartzman (Brazil)**  
Fundação Instituto Brasileiro e Geografia  
e Estatística  
simon@openlink.com.br

**Carlos Alberto Torres (U.S.A.)**  
University of California, Los Angeles  
torres@gseis UCLA.edu